



Academic Freedom and Political Change: American Lessons

Citation

Jewett, Andrew. 2010. Academic Freedom and Political Change: American Lessons. In Universities in Translation: The Mental Labor of Globalization, ed. Brett de Bary. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.

Permanent link

<http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:4908647>

Terms of Use

This article was downloaded from Harvard University's DASH repository, and is made available under the terms and conditions applicable to Other Posted Material, as set forth at <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:dash.current.terms-of-use#LAA>

Share Your Story

The Harvard community has made this article openly available.
Please share how this access benefits you. [Submit a story](#).

[Accessibility](#)

“Academic Freedom and Political Change: American Lessons”

Andrew Jewett, Harvard University

Forthcoming in *Universities in Translation: The Mental Labor of Globalization*,
ed. Brett de Bary (Hong Kong University Press)

The spread of neoliberalism around the globe since the end of the Cold War has fueled intense pressures on universities, which house both a gold mine of exploitable intellectual resources and some of the most vocal critics of unfettered capitalism. American universities, while substantially better insulated from such pressures than many of their counterparts in other nations, have nevertheless witnessed a sustained attempt to turn academic knowledge production toward neoliberal values. The emergence of a “competitiveness” funding regime in the United States has reoriented many disciplines toward the new market standard, especially in the sciences.¹ Indeed, the line between industrial and academic research, blurry but identifiable during the Cold War, has virtually vanished in key scientific fields. In the humanities and social sciences, a steady decline of public funding and an exodus of students to more lucrative fields has accompanied high-profile attacks on critical scholars by David Horowitz and other right-wing ideologues. Less confrontational, but potentially more dangerous, is the recent adoption by the Secretary of Education’s Commission on the Future of Higher Education of a rhetoric of “accountability” that has proven remarkably effective in disempowering teachers at the elementary and secondary levels.²

¹ Sheila Slaughter and Gary Rhoades, “The Emergence of a Competitiveness Research and Development Policy Coalition and the Commercialization of Academic Science and Technology,” *Science, Technology, & Human Values* 21 (1996): 303-339.

² Insightful analyses of the contemporary threats include *Academic Freedom After September 11*, ed. Beshara Doumani (New York: Zone, 2006); Frank Donoghue, *The Last Professors: The Corporate University and the Fate of the Humanities* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008); and Christopher

In the face of this neoliberal offensive, critical scholars have adopted a number of strategies. Many of us have recast ourselves as public intellectuals, seeking high-profile media outlets in which to speak to, and for, the American public. Meanwhile, we have worked to protect the small but steady flow of public funds for scholarship in the humanities and the “softer” social sciences. But such endeavors have often relied upon an idealized conception of academic freedom as an historical given, rather than a precarious, hard-won accomplishment of quite recent vintage. In the conclusion to his 2001 assessment of the state of the humanities, Louis Menand neatly captured a common image of the social role of critical scholarship:

The academic’s job in a free society is to serve the public culture by asking the questions the public does not want to ask, by investigating the subjects it cannot or will not investigate, by accommodating the voices it fails or refuses to accommodate. Academics need to look to the world to see what kind of teaching and thinking needs to be done, and how they might better organize themselves to do it; but they need to ignore the world’s insistence that they reproduce its self-image.³

But as Menand has pointed out elsewhere, this inspiring portrayal of free, critical inquiry depends for its realization on the existence of a public that will permit, and even finance, such openly subversive scholarship.⁴ And that may be precisely what American scholars are losing under current conditions. Enjoying more autonomy than our counterparts elsewhere, we easily forget that the public is, if only indirectly, our employer as well as our ultimate audience.

Newfield, *Unmaking the Public University: The Forty-Year Assault on the Middle Class* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008).

³ Louis Menand, “The Marketplace of Ideas,” American Council of Learned Societies Occasional Paper No. 49 (2001), <http://www.acls.org/op49.htm>.

⁴ Louis Menand, “The Limits of Academic Freedom,” in *The Future of Academic Freedom*, ed. Menand (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996): 3-20.

Academic freedom is a positive liberty as well as a negative one.⁵ It is not constituted by the mere absence of physical or legal obstacles. Instead, its exercise depends crucially on the existence of certain material conditions. To be blunt, scholarship requires money. In the United States, the ebb and flow of academic freedom has been closely tied to changes in the funding structure for university-based research. These changes, in turn, have been driven by the evolving relationship between science and the political economy. If we believe that critical scholarship is a social good, we should try to persuade the public not only to ensure the academic freedom necessary for such scholarship, but also to pay attention to the results. Because the universities do not and cannot exist in isolation from external political and economic forces, we must work to change the nature of those forces and the demands they place upon academic scholarship if we hope to maintain a protected space for critical inquiry.

The experience of the American universities in the Cold War era shows clearly—and ironically—that the conditions of academic work cannot be viewed in isolation from funding structures. The specific configuration of practices and ideals that American scholars call “academic freedom” came to fruition after World War Two. It is no coincidence that the same period also witnessed the creation of a new funding regime in the American university system, as federal agencies began to pour money into academic research. Indeed, we might say that the freedoms enjoyed by American scholars today are a direct result of the political quiescence of their Cold War-era predecessors, who tempered public fears about the radicalism of academic “eggheads” by vigorously constructing new weapons technologies and new ideological defenses of “the West.”

⁵ Menand also makes this point in “The Limits,” 5-7.

The federal government of the United States had little to do with university science before World War Two, except through the Department of Agriculture. In any case, leading scientists rejected the prospect of substantial federal support, because they feared that it would open the door to political interference with their work. But the success of government-sponsored science during the war, capped off by the development of the atomic bomb, led both scientists and politicians to call for a permanent federal research program. The onset of the Cold War in the late 1940s, followed by the Korean War in 1950, solidified this funding regime and turned it decisively toward military rather than civilian ends. Federal spending on research increased exponentially, especially after the Soviet Union's launch of the Sputnik satellite in 1957.⁶

The rise of the Cold War funding regime decisively altered the American research universities, both structurally and intellectually. By 1960, these institutions received 15% of their total budgets and a whopping 75% of their research budgets from government agencies, led by the Department of Defense.⁷ Administrators worked diligently to match the research priorities of their institutions with the needs of the government. Federal money allowed universities to enhance their reputations by luring top professors and graduate students without draining the general budget. At Stanford between 1957 and 1963, for example, the aeronautical engineering department expanded from two professors, a few graduate students, and a research budget of \$4,500 to twelve professors, 179 graduate students, and more than \$657,000 in research funds. This growth cost

⁶ Roger L. Geiger, *Research and Relevant Knowledge: American Research Universities Since World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Hugh Davis Graham and Nancy Diamond, *The Rise of American Research Universities: Elites and Challengers in the Postwar Era* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

⁷ Christopher Newfield, *Ivy and Industry: Business and the Making of the American University, 1880-1980* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 115.

Stanford nothing; all of the money came from the military and its industrial contractors.⁸

Federal funding allowed universities to serve the nation while garnering prestige at the expense of their competitors.

But there was one major obstacle: the faculty themselves. In retrospect, it seems self-evident that a massive governmental outlay for academic research served the interests of university scholars. At the time, however, most faculty wanted to return to the mode of academic life that they had known before the war. Many worked in areas irrelevant to the nation's military or ideological defense. Others wanted to concentrate on research itself, rather than on grant applications. Departmental cultures reflected these priorities, stressing teaching and small-scale, self-directed research. Over time, administrators managed to convert the leading American universities from institutions oriented toward teaching, where professors carried out research on the side, to institutions focused on externally funded research, with teaching distinctly subordinate to the competition for grants and graduate students. Along the way, however, they faced considerable faculty resistance.⁹

Historians have studied especially closely how the implementation of the new Cold War funding regime unfolded at Stanford. The key figure there was Frederick Terman, an electrical engineer who worked at Harvard's government-sponsored Radio Research Laboratory during the war and returned to Stanford a strong advocate of external funding for academic research. Between 1945 and 1965, Terman and other

⁸ Stuart W. Leslie, *The Cold War and American Science: The Military-Industrial-Academic Complex at MIT and Stanford* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 102.

⁹ Rebecca S. Lowen, "'Exploiting a Wonderful Opportunity': The Patronage of Scientific Research at Stanford University," *Minerva* 30 (1992): 391-421; Lowen, *Creating the Cold War University: The Transformation of Stanford* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

administrators transformed Stanford from a second-tier regional university into a world-class research institution boasting tens of millions of dollars in federal contracts.¹⁰

According to Rebecca S. Lowen, Stanford faculty relied on two broad criteria in personnel decisions before Terman's interventions: teaching excellence and contributions to the advancement of disciplinary knowledge. Departments relied on the criteria of "coverage and balance" in both teaching and research, seeking to include all areas of knowledge deemed important by scholars in the field.¹¹ But Terman used a different standard of academic value, one pegged to the institutional competition between universities rather than the scholarly judgments of disciplines and their affiliated departments. "Academic prestige," he argued, "depends upon high but narrow steeples of academic excellence," rather than coverage and balance.¹² And Terman expected external patrons, rather than scholars themselves, to define excellence. He wanted faculty to concentrate on what he called the "profitable" fields: those that brought in external funding. Terman developed a series of quantitative measures for profitability, assessing each professor in terms of course attendance, numbers of publications and graduate students, and external funding. He expected every department and every faculty member to be at least self-sustaining, if not profitable. In other words, Terman laid out an essentially neoliberal model for the university—with one key difference. The institution would "profit" through competition for outside contracts, not through direct market involvement.¹³

¹⁰ Lowen, "'Exploiting,'" 396-397; Leslie, *The Cold War*, 45.

¹¹ Lowen, "'Exploiting,'" 410, 415.

¹² Quoted in Larry Cuban, *How Scholars Trumped Teachers: Change Without Reform in University Curriculum, Teaching, and Research, 1890-1990* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1999), 29.

¹³ Lowen, "'Exploiting,'" 398, 412, 416, 420.

As dean of Stanford's engineering school after 1945, Terman encountered little organized resistance to his plan. Several professors chafed at the secrecy and oversight requirements of externally funded research, claiming that these interfered with the "cool, unhurried, and scientifically provocative" atmosphere of the university. But Terman simply ignored their grumbling and imposed his new profitability standard, rewarding those faculty willing to go along. Just four years after he took charge, the engineering school's annual intake had topped \$1 million from the Office of Naval Research alone. In 1955, President J. Wallace Sterling promoted Terman to provost and charged him with extending the new model to the School of Humanities and Sciences. Facing much stiffer opposition there, Terman set out to weaken departmental control over personnel decisions and budgeting. He ordered the biology department to double its production of doctorates, for example, and insisted that the geologists eliminate all courses with fewer than ten students.¹⁴

The biggest struggle came in the political science department, where virtually the entire faculty dug in its heels. Terman wanted Stanford's political scientists to adopt the new behavioral approach, which would bring in grants from the Ford Foundation. But the chair, James Watkins, hoped instead to balance behavioral research with more traditional courses based on texts by Thorstein Veblen, Charles Beard, and Alexis de Tocqueville. In 1956, when the department tried to hire a political theorist rather than a behavioral scientist, Terman vetoed the appointment and removed Watkins from his chairmanship. Several professors threatened to resign in protest, but ultimately there was little they

¹⁴ Lowen, "'Exploiting,'" 407-409, 413-414.

could do. Terman had the strong backing of President Sterling, which allowed him to run roughshod over the political scientists and other recalcitrant faculty.¹⁵

Crucially, the line dividing Terman's supporters from his opponents ran through the departments, rather than pitting scientists against humanists. A few entrepreneurial professors in statistics, physics, psychology, and philosophy shared Terman's vision for Stanford. On the other hand, chemistry, biology, geology, and most of the social sciences—even economics—held out for an older standard of academic value. Yet Terman's opponents focused solely on defending their departmental autonomy. Ignoring the broad political context, they targeted direct violations of their traditional academic roles, such as new controls over research, the narrowing of departmental coverage, and the undervaluation of teaching in tenure decisions. They also focused their fire on Terman himself, calling him an insensitive administrator who had overstepped his bounds. In the end, Terman steamrolled the opposition and created a new, highly profitable Stanford. He and like-minded administrators elsewhere produced the research university system within which American scholars work today.¹⁶

Lowen's account of faculty resistance to the Cold War funding regime suggests that academic freedom played an ambiguous role in relation to the larger political developments of the era. On one hand, the administrative changes of that era weakened certain forms of academic freedom. Terman's interventions, for example, temporarily broke the pattern of strong departmental control over personnel decisions. Moreover, administrators at Stanford and elsewhere increasingly circumvented departments by creating independent research centers, which allowed for unmediated relationships

¹⁵ Lowen, "Exploiting," 415-419.

¹⁶ Lowen, "Exploiting," 409-410, 412.

between researchers and external patrons, not subject to traditional requirements such as tenure.¹⁷ At the national level, meanwhile, the universities surrendered some of their corporate autonomy in the face of organized political pressure. The largely apolitical nature of faculty resistance at Stanford stemmed in part from Senator Joseph McCarthy's conspiratorial campaign against communist infiltrators, which dominated American political culture in the early 1950s.¹⁸

On the other hand, the degree of academic freedom already enjoyed by individual researchers at Stanford and elsewhere actually helped to undercut the substantial opposition to externally funded research. As in the case of today's shift of academic resources toward the fight against terrorism, the alteration of scholarly priorities in the 1950s resulted primarily from the "soft power" of funding differentials, rather than outright coercion. Enterprising professors could buck the expectations of their colleagues and pursue outside funding opportunities, giving them a leg up in the new administrative environment and frequently catapulting them into leadership roles. Because these scholars controlled the conditions of their own research, they could match up at will with funding agencies.¹⁹

More importantly, the solidification of the Cold War funding regime in the mid-1950s created the broad institutional matrix within which American professors still operate. The new reward structure gave scholars who oriented their work toward the Cold War campaign a steady flow of external money. At the same time, however, all American

¹⁷ Geiger, *Research and Relevant Knowledge*, 48-58.

¹⁸ Lowen, *Creating the Cold War University*, 92. Jessica Wang has documented the impact of McCarthyism on American scientists in *American Science in an Age of Anxiety: Scientists, Anticommunism, and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999) and "Scientists and the Problem of the Public in Cold War America, 1945-1960," *Osiris* n.s. 17 (2002): 323-347.

¹⁹ Geiger, *Research and Relevant Knowledge*, 61.

faculty gained a substantial degree of added latitude in their professional and public activities. Ironically, then, the integration of the American research universities into the military-industrial complex after World War Two provided the context for the specific configuration of faculty freedoms that we know today.²⁰

As an abstract ideal, academic freedom dated back to the formative period of the American university system, shortly after the Civil War. During the intervening decades, professors struggled to establish greater control over the conditions of their work. John Dewey and other scholars founded the American Association of University Professors in 1915, crafting a systematic definition of the rights and freedoms of academic faculty. AAUP officials were particularly concerned to support progressive social theorists under fire from business-minded trustees. But the group did not assert an unrestricted right to free public speech for faculty. It would limit the sphere of protected expression to “conclusions gained by a scholar’s method and held in a scholar’s spirit,” namely “the fruits of competent and patient and sincere inquiry,” stated “with dignity, courtesy, and temperateness of language.” Indeed, only two years after drawing up its guidelines, the AAUP allowed the firing of professors who spoke out against World War One.²¹

During the 1920s and 1930s, American university professors gained *de facto* control over hiring decisions, and the tenure system began to emerge. The core of academic freedom in those decades was departmental autonomy; administrators increasingly steered clear of personnel decisions. After the war, however, McCarthy’s campaign revealed the limits of existing structures of academic freedom, particularly with

²⁰ Christopher Newfield explores the ironies of postwar academia in *Ivy and Industry*, showing that the Cold War university offered a protected sphere for a form of intellectual “craft labor” within the larger structure of a market economy.

²¹ Julie A. Reuben, *The Making of the Modern University: Intellectual Transformation and the Marginalization of Morality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 199-200.

regard to the public speech of faculty members. Like other employers, universities frequently followed up on McCarthy's hearings by disciplining or firing those accused of disloyalty. Rather than defending academic freedom in principle, universities sought to protect their institutional reputations by retaining prominent scholars and dismissing marginal ones. By the time McCarthy was discredited in 1954, over a hundred professors had been targeted as communist sympathizers and at least thirty fired, especially in sensitive fields such as international relations and area studies.²²

Yet the structural changes of the postwar era made it possible for scholars to carve out new space for academic freedom after McCarthyism waned. Once department chairs sympathetic to the new funding regime were in place, faculty—at least those willing to take advantage of the new grant opportunities—found that it brought them a substantial degree of autonomy. After all, the American government depended heavily on academic research to drive the arms race. Capitalizing on this dependence, the National Science Foundation stood up to McCarthy in 1954 and declared that it would no longer subject its grant applicants to security checks. Other science agencies soon adopted the same policy.²³ Meanwhile, these agencies worked to promote a sense of freedom among scientists by providing long-term grants with few strings attached, often for work without obvious applications. Following a pattern established during World War Two by the powerful science administrator Vannevar Bush, the federal government placated faculty by replicating some of the more desirable aspects of interwar working conditions.²⁴

²² Geiger, *Research and Relevant Knowledge*, 38-40. The classic study is Ellen Schrecker, *No Ivory Tower: McCarthyism and the Universities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

²³ Alfred K. Mann, *For Better or for Worse: The Marriage of Science and Government in the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 96.

²⁴ Slaughter and Rhoades, "Emergence," 330-331

The AAUP's definition of academic freedom finally took hold in American political culture after McCarthy's downfall. It gained the official endorsement of most leading academic bodies in the 1960s and became the basis for case law in the 1970s.²⁵ On the whole, then, postwar American scientists won themselves new freedoms by agreeing to concentrate on subjects of importance to federal agencies. Over time, moreover, they re-narrativized these changes by convincing themselves that they had freely chosen the direction of their own research. Scientists of that era also leaned heavily on the belief that advances in fundamental knowledge would inevitably promote human welfare.²⁶

Similar dynamics operated among humanists and social scientists. Many found a niche for themselves in the Cold War funding regime by engaging in a spirited ideological defense of the West. Employing a narrative strategy that could be called "normative description," these scholars identified what they found most laudable in their nation's experience as its innate essence, while writing off the numerous exceptions as merely temporary aberrations. Humanists and social scientists used an array of implicitly normative concepts, especially those related to the umbrella term "Western civilization," to goad their fellow citizens into fulfilling what they portrayed as the nation's core ideals. America could not prevail through weapons or industrial production alone, these scholars reasoned; the ethical framework of Western civilization offered the necessary normative complement to the value-neutral techniques of science.²⁷

²⁵ A 1940 restatement emphasized the threat to academic freedom from national campaigns against political coercion. See Walter P. Metzger, "The 1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure," *Law and Contemporary Problems* 53 (1990), 4.

²⁶ Sheila Slaughter, Cynthia Joan Archerd, and Teresa I. D. Campbell, "Boundaries and Quandaries: How Professors Negotiate Market Relations," *Review of Higher Education* 28 (2004), 140.

²⁷ For example, Nils Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future: Modernization Theory in Cold War America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), esp. 41-68.

In sum, by voluntarily aligning themselves with the new funding regime, the scholars of the early Cold War era created the existing university system, with its particular forms of academic freedom. Working within that structure, succeeding generations of scholars have openly challenged the Cold War regime and its allied definitions of science and Western civilization. Yet the welter of critical arguments circulating in the universities has done little to slow the introduction, beginning in the 1970s, of a new competitiveness regime and its free-market standard of academic value.

While the Cold War regime revolved around government spending for defense-related technologies, advocates of the competitiveness regime would embed the university in a fully privatized economy, situating it as a source of intellectual property and skilled employees for high-tech global firms. Top administrators have worked closely with corporate CEOs to win legislation facilitating “technology transfer”: the commercial development of products based on academic research, including publicly funded research. The Bayh-Dole Act of 1980, for example, allowed universities to take out patents on the findings of their faculty, essentially turning these institutions into for-profit enterprises. As a result, academic scientists have become increasingly invested in the commodification of knowledge, often through start-up companies based on their research.²⁸

From an administrative standpoint, it makes perfect sense to tap the growing flood of corporate cash instead of the dwindling stream of public funds. But corporate money puts substantial new strains on scientific researchers. The free spending habits and minimal oversight of the postwar agencies have given way to private firms’ relentless pursuit of the bottom line. Studies show that, as in the 1950s, many scientists resent being

²⁸ Slaughter and Rhoades, “Emergence,” esp. 315-318.

pushed by administrators toward the new external patron. They dislike the day-to-day controls, the limitations imposed on publishing by patent requirements, and the emphasis on short-term profitability that comes with the commercialization of academic knowledge. Yet these scientists seem to feel as if they have no other option. For better or for worse, they regard the boundary between industry and academia as a thing of the past. In fact, American scientists often reconcile themselves to corporate funding by noting that they cannot otherwise fulfill their specifically academic roles as researchers and teachers of graduate students.²⁹

The competitiveness regime also threatens to squeeze out those of us whose work does not lead to marketable technologies or contribute to the ideological defense of neoliberalism. The losers include many social scientists, virtually all humanists, and even a substantial number of natural scientists, including some who prospered during the Cold War, such as nuclear physicists. And of course, the social costs of the new regime are massive. In the words of one study, academic privatization allows corporations to

make alienable areas of public life previously held by the community as a whole: scientific knowledge, databases, technology, strains and properties of plants, and even living animals and fragments of human beings. Historically, this shift in ownership rights is on a scale with the enclosures of communal property by large landholders in Great Britain and Latin America with the onset of market economies.³⁰

If the Cold War years witnessed a sustained diversion of public funds to private industrial concerns, the neoliberal era promises the direct appropriation of the public domain itself.

Despite the fact that the contemporary American university is buzzing with attacks on neoliberalism, such criticism has failed to stop the imposition of neoliberal values. What, then, will it take to create sustained and effective resistance to the

²⁹ Slaughter et al, "Boundaries and Quandaries."

³⁰ Slaughter and Rhodes, "Emergence," 323.

competitiveness regime? I believe that critical scholars should not only vigorously defend academic freedom, but also engage in the much harder work of political mobilization. As the experience of the 1950s shows, substantial academic freedom is entirely compatible with a regressive national project. Moreover, today's neoliberal offensive, coming largely in the form of funding discrepancies and tuition hikes rather than politically motivated firings, works in and around the existing structures of academic freedom.³¹ In fact, recent history suggests that little effective resistance to a new funding system is possible at the local level. If an individual researcher, department, or university opts out, another will simply step in.

Solutions, then, must be found at the national and even international levels, where funding regimes originate. Rather than focusing exclusively on our own working conditions, critical scholars must also create a political constituency for our conception of the university as something more than another profit center, while weaving that conception into a broader vision of the good society. In short, we must help to create a viable political alternative to neoliberalism. If nothing else, pure self-interest should point us toward large-scale political mobilization. Our livelihood may depend on building a new base of public support for the idea that critical scholarship is a social good.

Unfortunately, the recent conditions of American academia have hardly fostered the skills needed for such a campaign. Ironically, critical scholars may lag the most in an area that we generally portray as our distinctive specialty: the ability to speak across lines of difference. This is a crucial weakness. Any effective political movement involves a

³¹ David A. Hollinger makes this point in "Money and Academic Freedom a Half-Century after McCarthyism: Universities Amid the Force Fields of Capital," in *Cosmopolitanism and Solidarity: Studies in Ethnoracial, Religious, and Professional Affiliation in the United States* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006). Noting that American business interests have waged a subtle but concerted campaign against critical scholars since at least 1971, Hollinger calls for "faculty solidarity" in response.

cluster of strategic alliances between groups with different agendas. Even the vaunted “single-issue” movements of recent decades are fractured by multiple lines of tension or outright conflict. Coalition-building thus requires careful attention to styles of persuasion and the nuances of interpersonal relations.

Of course, these are topics of great analytical interest to contemporary scholars. Yet in our own writing, we tend toward a rhetoric of wholesale debunking. Intense competition for jobs and fellowships drives us to stake out the largest possible piece of analytical ground and to reject prior interpretations outright, boldly decentering what has been taken for granted by even our most theoretically sophisticated colleagues. This approach is ill-suited, to say the least, for coalition-building. In that enterprise, to be critical, political, public, or simply relevant is not a matter of intention, but of effect. And we will face audiences whose assumptions and expectations differ markedly from those of the peers who review our professional work.

One obstacle to effective communication with outside audiences has drawn considerable attention in recent years: the superabundance of jargon in contemporary scholarship. Yet that phenomenon seems merely symptomatic of a larger problem with academic argumentation, as viewed from the standpoint of political mobilization. For all our vilification of the Enlightenment, we still tend to employ a rationalist theory of persuasion, presuming that the key to rhetorical authority lies in producing an accurate, generalized account of reality. We are, after all, analysts and theorists, not politicians, columnists, or comedians. We speak primarily to colleagues who, like us, search for compelling theoretical generalizations. If we fail to convince our colleagues, we go back to the drawing board and root out conceptual weaknesses in our arguments, often

inventing new terms along the way. Effective political mobilization, by contrast, would require framing our existing critiques to appeal to the particular values and interests of wider audiences, for whom conceptual precision and theoretical power are not necessarily major concerns.

In our academic discourse, we also focus attention on the deep philosophical “roots” of social and cultural phenomena, seeking to induce a radical and total shift of perspective in our readers and listeners. Here, again, a rationalist theory of persuasion rears its head. Even if it is true that social practices or “forms of life” express architectonic philosophical assumptions—a belief that may itself reflect our unusually intense concern with theoretical generalizations—such practices usually change through small, incremental steps. Our broader audiences will almost certainly question neoliberal strategies of governance before they will recognize the contingent nature of the modern nation-state or the individual self. Leaving such foundational assumptions untouched may be a decisive step away from the conditions of ideal justice. But in speaking to those who hold such assumptions, acts of foundational deconstruction may prove even less productive.

One categorical abstraction, “Western modernity,” may cause particular trouble when applied to the political arena. Viewing the modern West as a unified whole has brought major theoretical gains across many disciplines. Yet the concept also draws attention away from the particularities of the Western polities. This could prove especially damaging in the American case. As it stands, our critical arsenal works perfectly for defamiliarizing the founding assumptions of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, but it will not help us make a dent in the strongly Christian public culture

of the United States. In a project of political mobilization, we will need to attend carefully to questions of national difference, even within the West. Any political alternative we envision must appeal to *actually existing* publics.

Our problems with persuasion and coalition-building appear with particular poignancy in the relationship between humanists and scientists. Despite the frequent sniping between these groups, a successful strategy for political action must include both. After all, the sciences set the terms for the external funding of academic institutions. Scientists also hold more sway with the American public than do those of us in other departments. Most Americans, whatever their religious views, identify science with qualities they value, such as efficiency, ingenuity, and practicality. Yet a fundamental suspicion of science lies at the very core of humanists' professional identities. In the United States, the humanities emerged in tandem with a stereotyped image of science as heartless, mechanistic, and culturally hegemonic. In a very real sense, the American humanities disciplines have always been the "not-sciences," staunch advocates of the people against the depredations of positivism.³²

Fortunately, humanists and scientists have at least one powerful point of commonality in our shared status as academic professionals. Whatever our other affiliations, as members of the professional middle class we endorse an ideal that Christopher Newfield calls simply "good work": autonomous, self-directed work that we control individually and collectively; work that provides a decent salary, but also other benefits, prominently including the sense of satisfaction that comes from believing that

³² Bruce Kuklick, "The Emergence of the Humanities," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 81 (1990): 194-206. Of course, scientists use an array of equally stereotyped images, calling humanists effete, self-obsessed, impractical, and perhaps even dangerous. It is deeply unfortunate—and perhaps no coincidence—that the recent "science wars" erupted just as the process of academic privatization kicked into high gear.

the fruit of our labor represents a substantial contribution to the public good.³³ Most scientists join humanists in rejecting the neoliberal vision of a polity organized around profit. Their ideal of good work militates against using profit as the sole measure of academic value, as does their commitment to the pursuit of theoretical knowledge. A project designed to counter neoliberalism cannot succeed without enlisting the many scientists who want the university to be something more than a handmaiden of corporate power.

Of course, mobilizing faculty across disciplinary boundaries is easier said than done. But here, too, abandoning a rationalist theory of persuasion may help pave the way. Scholars need not agree on theoretical, methodological, or even epistemological grounds in order to work together toward shared political goals. For example, critical humanists need not disabuse scientists of their belief that scientific knowledge mirrors an external reality. Nor do we need to persuade them that objectivity is illusory and the boundary between research and ideological struggle porous. Scientists can draw a line between science and politics that many humanists find incoherent, while still standing up against neoliberalism *in their capacities as professional scholars and as citizens*. Creating a base of legitimacy for a new academic funding regime is, in the first instance, a political problem rather than an epistemological one. Without abandoning our own distinctive knowledge practices, American scholars can work to build an intellectually ecumenical coalition on behalf of a more socially responsible conception of the university's role in the political economy.

In conclusion, let me stress that the *content* of today's critical scholarship is not the problem. To say that our academic work serves poorly as a vehicle for building

³³ Newfield, *Ivy and Industry*, 4.

connections with citizens and scientists is not to say that it is insufficient for its own purposes. We should, however, question the common assumption that such work will, by its very nature, advance the political struggle against neoliberalism. As the broad sweep of history makes clear, critical scholarship is certainly *one mode* of political activism. But it is hardly an effective response to every political challenge. In defending the universities, sophisticated meditations on the philosophical assumptions underlying neoliberalism will be far less valuable than concrete, rhetorically effective rebuttals of the right's core claims: that the market is our savior and criticism of it a grave danger. To sustain the academic freedom we currently enjoy, we may need to explore new ways of using it, listening more carefully to our fellow citizens while attending more closely to our own interests as professionals. Well-versed at producing discomfort in our readers, we shy away from it ourselves. Yet at this historical juncture, uncomfortable alliances and rhetorical modes may be a necessary complement to our utopian visions. The American university has, and will always have, major flaws as a tool for political change. But we would be far worse off without it.